

**Oral History Interview of Musician and Composer Van Ky [Vãn Ký]**  
**DVD 08**  
**Hanoi, 7 June 2007**

**I – Interviewer Merle Pribbenow**  
**VK – Van Ky**

I: [In Vietnamese] First of all, I must take care of a few procedural matters. [In English] Today is 7 June, and we are interviewing Mr. Van Ky, a well-known musician and veteran of the revolution. [Switching back to Vietnamese] Excuse me; I had to give the introduction first. I also have one other procedural matter. In accordance with U.S. law, I would like to ask you to give your permission for this film to be used as a research document and possibly also as a documentary film for students and others interested in the Vietnam War and Vietnamese history, so that they can watch it and learn from it. Do you give your permission?

VK: Yes, I do.

I: Thank you.

VK: I am very happy to give my permission.

I: First of all, I would like you to tell me your real name, because I know that the name Van Ky is...

VK: It is my pen name. My true name is Vu Van Ky [Vũ Vãn Ký], but I use just Van Ky to make it easier.

I: A pen name [bút danh] for a musician, would that be called a music name [nhạc danh]?

VK: In music it is still called a pen name.

I: A pen name. When and where were you born?

VK: I was born in 1928 in the same place as Composer Van Cao [Văn Cao] – that is, Lien Minh Village, Vu Ban District, Nam Dinh Province. My village is just ten kilometers from the city.

I: The city of Nam Dinh?

VK: Yes, Nam Dinh City.

I: Ten kilometers away?

VK: Yes, ten kilometers.

I: What was your family situation? That is, what did your parents do to make a living? How many brothers and sisters did you have?

VK: I was born into a peasant family. My mother was a farmer, and my father was a teacher. He taught the old Chinese characters [chữ nho]. I had two younger brothers and one younger sister.

I: So you were the oldest?

VK: Yes, I was the oldest.

I: Your family was poor, right?

VK: Yes. In fact, we were not extremely poor, but we were in the category that could be called, “making just enough to live on.”

I: If your father was a teacher of the Chinese characters, then he must have received a good education, right?

VK: Yes, he had studied previously.

I: Could your parents speak French, or did they have any connections with the French?

VK: No. My father spoke just enough French to use in his embroidery profession. He made embroidery and sold his wares at the market.

I: Oh, embroidered cloth.

VK: Yes, he embroidered cloth and sold it. And if you sold wares to the French, you had to know a little French. That's all. But he never attended a French school.

I: And what about you? When you first went to school, did you go to school in Nam Dinh City, or...?

VK: No, I only attended first grade in my native area, and then my grandmother on my father's side brought me down to live with them in Thanh Hoa. She raised me and sent me to school down there.

I: So you went down to Thanh Hoa and lived with your grandmother?

VK: I lived with my grandmother, and then after she died I lived with my uncle. I had to move to live with him, but it was still in Thanh Hoa province. We lived in Dong Cong District.

I: So you did not attend the school in Thanh Hoa City?

VK: I attended school at the district level.

I: The district?

VK: Yes. As you may know, back then, if one wanted to attend a Level 2 school, one had to go to the district capital. The villages did not have schools of that level.

I: Level 1 [elementary school] was several years of schooling, right?

VK: Yes, Level 1 was three years.

I: So that meant that you were separated from your family when you were still very young.

VK: Yes.

I: So you probably still missed your parents, isn't that right?

VK: I missed them very much. I only remember that when I was about six years old, I could not go to sleep at night. I missed them so much that I couldn't go to sleep. And when I heard the sounds of the night birds calling, I couldn't sleep. I was still very young, but I already felt the pain of love for my home and my family – from the time I was still very young. Even when I was young, I knew how to tend water buffalo. I could tend water buffaloes; I could cut the grass, etc., because my grandmother was a farmer.

I: She farmed, too?

VK: Yes, she was a farmer too.

I: What about your grandfather? Had he already passed away?

VK: Yes, he had passed away before this. He had also been a teacher of the Chinese characters. He was a very good teacher of the characters. And my father had learned the Chinese characters from him, from my grandfather. My grandfather opened what was essentially a small school in Thanh Hoa to teach the Chinese characters and to make some extra money. So that gave my grandparents a little bit more in terms of economic resources so that they could take in and raise a grandchild.

I: So you lived with your grandmother until her death, and then you moved in with your uncle, right?

VK: Yes. Later I lived with my uncle. When my grandmother died, I moved to live with him. He also lived in Thanh Hoa, but in a different district in that province. It was the district where my uncle and my grandfather had previously been in business together. They had sold Chinese medicines. They worked as traditional herbal doctors and sold Chinese medicines. So I went down there and my uncle raised me there.

I: And you continued to go to school?

VK: Yes. To tell the truth, I only attended school up to what in the old system we called the First Class, “cours premier” – what would now be called the fifth grade. After that, I studied on my own, and I had a private tutor. I did that until I had completed almost all the courses required to complete high school.

I: And you stayed at home to help your uncle farm, or in his business?

VK: Yes, I helped out in the family business, and I also studied at the same time.

I: So you must have studied very hard.

VK: Yes, I studied very hard and I did well in my studies. I received mostly commendations, and I was a very good student.

I: When you were a child, did you realize that you had a gift for music?

VK: Yes, at least a little bit. Initially, I took part in the school’s theater group. I remember that we learned French songs and performed musical skits, using plays written by “Le Fontain” [spelling?], a French scholar. So we used to put on those kinds of plays – for instance, one about a crow and a fox, that kind of thing. I was a quick study when it came to singing, and I was able to act and to sing in these plays. So I guess I knew that I had talent in this area from that time on.

I: When the Second World War began and the Japanese arrived, did those events have any effect on your life?

VK: Those events had a very powerful impact on me. I began to participate in the revolutionary activities of the Viet Minh – back then we called it the Viet Minh. I began participating in these activities very early on, beginning in 1943. At that time I was only about 15 years old. By that time I was already a member of the Viet Minh and I was taking part in propaganda activities – distributing leaflets and spreading propaganda.

Then came the Japanese coup, when the Japanese overthrew the French government.

When the coup occurred, I was being held in a French prison. I had been arrested by the French but had not yet been convicted or sentenced. I had been in jail for about six months when the Japanese took over. After the Japanese took over, they wanted to demonstrate that they had come in to liberate East Asia. That's what they said. They wanted the Viet Minh to join them, so they ordered the release of political prisoners. But in fact, they sent us back to our local areas, our home areas, and the local government then put us under surveillance and restricted our movements.

I: Who was the first person, ah, the one who persuaded you to join the revolution? Was it a family member?

VK: No, it was someone from far away, someone from the outside. He might have been a Viet Minh cadre.

I: He came to Thanh Hoa to...

VK: He came to my district. He probably came to recruit people to form an infrastructure, and I was fortunate enough to have a chance to make contact with the Viet Minh at that time.

I: How did you meet him? Was it by accident, or...

VK: It was a very simple circumstance, purely by accident. I was helping the family business by selling books, and this cadre stopped by to buy books. Initially, he just bought books and we talked about different books, etc. And then gradually, he probably noticed that I had a spirit of patriotism.

I: You had a nationalist spirit.

VK: Yes, a nationalist spirit. So eventually he recruited me, and I became a cadre carrying out their work in that place.

I: This was also probably at least in part a result of the influence of your family, because both your father and your grandfather were scholars of the ancient characters, the traditional writing system, and scholars of the old characters often had nationalist attitudes.

VK: That's right. You are correct. I remember that my father said something, when my uncle was planning to send me to school to continue my education. My father said, "What's the point of having him go to school so much? Just so he can become a servant of the French?" He meant that working for the French as one of their servants was a shameful, disgraceful thing. To join the French, to become a civil servant in the French government, to become a servant of the French – When he said, "Why give him a good education? Just so he can become a French servant?" - that was an expression of disdain and contempt. That influenced me, and I have never forgotten his statement. I am sure that my father taught me many things, but that is the one thing that I have always remembered. That statement is probably what pointed me in the direction that my life has followed.

I: So even though you were separated from your immediate family and living some distance away, you still saw your parents occasionally?

VK: Yes. Sometimes my family would visit, but perhaps, later on, I was influenced more by my uncle, because I lived with him and he loved me very much. He devoted a great deal of attention to giving me a good education, and he also made sure to take care of my physical health as well. When we woke up, he made me exercise very early in the

morning, and I have continued with that habit ever since. He also gave me a lot of books to read. Initially, I would read them out loud to him.

I: Did you just read the new Romanized Vietnamese alphabet [quốc ngữ], or did you ...

VK: Yes, I read books in the Roman Vietnamese alphabet. I remember that he had a whole lot of books, on peasant farmers, for example, and he had “*Les Miserables*,” by Victor Hugo, and the Chinese book, “*The Tale of the Three Kingdoms*.” So I had a very multicultural background beginning very early in life, and this was all because of my uncle. My uncle read a tremendous number of books – old books, new books, Eastern books, Western books – he read them all. Initially, he would make me read to him out loud, but later on I grew to like them, and so I fell in love with reading.

I: Now, you began working for the revolution in 1943, is that correct?

VK: Yes, in 1943 I began to conduct operations for the Viet Minh.

I: Initially, you just went around spreading propaganda and trying to recruit people, trying to gain the sympathy and support of other people, right?

VK: That is correct. I also distributed leaflets. When I first started to distribute leaflets, I remember that one of the leaflets contained an appeal issued by Nguyen Ai Quoc.<sup>1</sup> That was the first time I had heard of Nguyen Ai Quoc.

I: You had to conduct your operations totally in secret, right?

VK: Yes, in total secrecy. But I enjoyed this work very much, because I was at that age, and I was working for a serious cause and for something that was exactly in line with my own aspirations. I learned a lot, and I liked those kinds of activities.

I: And at that time you were so young that you were not yet considered to be a young man, is that right?

---

<sup>1</sup> Nguyen Ai Quoc was an alias used by Ho Chi Minh.



VK: Yes, at that time I was still considered to be a juvenile, a child. Then in 1944 I was arrested. In late 1944 I was arrested by the French secret police.

I: What were the circumstances of your arrest?

VK: I was arrested as the result of a mistake by a courier. The courier accidentally exposed a document that I was sending to someone else, so my activities were exposed.

I: Ordinarily, your contact with the revolution was via a courier who came down to Thanh Hoa...

VK: Yes, and the courier carried documents ...

I: ...and the courier would deliver messages to various people?

VK: Right. So I was exposed because of a mistake made by the courier. Initially, I refused to confess. I endured every type of torture and physical abuse, but I refused.

I: Were you arrested by Frenchmen or...

VK: Yes, by Frenchmen.

I: Frenchmen, not Vietnamese working for the French?

VK: Initially, I was arrested by the district chief. I was arrested at the district level, but when I was interrogated and tortured, that was done by a Frenchman. The French secret police chief.

I: Was this done by the organization that was called the "Sureté"?

VK. Yes, it was the Sureté. It was the secret police chief who did it.

I: And they beat you, or...?

VK: Oh, they used every type of torture.

I: Yes, I have heard a lot about this kind of thing.

VK: They used every type of torture. And especially they used a hand-cranked electrical generator. They would attach wires to both my ears, and then they would turn the crank. They had two types of machine – one gave a light shock, and one that gave a very severe electrical shock. But I made it through all of that without confessing, even though, sometimes when they turned the crank it felt as if my body was being sliced into thousands of little pieces of meat. But when one's will is firm, ah, and perhaps it was also because I was so young at that time, so I had the strength of youth and I was able to endure everything they threw at me.

I: So were you the only one arrested, or were there others in Thanh Hoa that were arrested along with you?

VK: There were a few others.

I: A few others?

VK: Yes, a few of my comrades were also arrested, but no one talked. The others, those who had not been arrested, were not exposed. We kept our mouths shut and did not expose our organization. No one else was exposed – just those of us who had been arrested. Nothing happened to those who had not been picked up, in spite of the extreme physical abuse and torture we suffered.

I: At the time you were arrested, did the Viet Minh have a large organization in Thanh Hoa?

VK: Yes.

I: So you had quite a few people?

VK: We had a very large organization. As I understood it, we had an organization in every district in the province.

I: In every district?

VK: Yes, in every district. We also had a war zone out in the jungle. That was where our main headquarters was, the one that controlled all of our activities in Thanh Hoa province.

I: And probably since you were operating in secret you weren't allowed to know the identities of...

VK: We did not know anyone's name.

I: So you did not know who your leaders were?

VK: We were not allowed to know that.

I: But you had heard of Nguyen Ai Quoc, right?

VK: Yes. I even knew that Nguyen Ai Quoc was our leader and we also had leaflets written in Chinese characters. These leaflets were written by Nguyen Ai Quoc himself. I went around and pasted these leaflets up in various places.

I: Did you know how to read the Chinese characters back then?

VK: No, I couldn't read Chinese characters.

I: You couldn't read the characters?

VK (laughing): No.

I: So you were pasting up leaflets but you did not know what they said?

VK: I didn't know. It was for other people to read, but I did not know what they said. But I knew of Nguyen Ai Quoc, and I knew what kind of person he was. I knew that he was a patriotic leader who was the leader of the Vietnamese revolution.

I: Now, for about how long were you interrogated and tortured?

VK: It must have been, ah, as I recall it was about ten days.

I: Ten days?

VK: Yes.

I: So that must have been terrible.

VK: You cannot even imagine it. But I was always thinking about making an escape. I thought of every possible way that I might be able to escape from the prison, but I could not escape, because they had my legs fastened down in stocks and shackles on my wrists. So I had to take it, but I still refused to confess, and when they searched my home, they did not find a single thing.

I: So all they had was another person who had been arrested...

VK: Yes, another person who had given them my name. But when they searched my house, they did not find one single piece of evidence, because I had hidden everything, all my documents, very well. I hid my material so well that after I got out of prison I went back and all my documents were still there, completely untouched. They could not find them (laughs). There were a lot of strange and unusual things that happened during the course of our activities.

I: When you were imprisoned, were you held together with the other people who had been arrested, or did they separate you and hold you individually, each separated from the other?

VK: Many times they divided us up, but there were other times that they put us all together in one cell. During these times we would talk to each other and agree on what we should tell them, so that everything made sense.

I: Were the other people who were arrested as young as you, or were some of them older?

VK: There were others who were older than me, about 25 or 30 years old.

I: 25 or 30? (VK nods affirmatively). But there were no old people?

VK: No, just youths and middle-aged [sic], but I was the youngest one in the entire group.

I: You were the youngest? When you were arrested you must have been 15, ah, 16 years old, right?

VK: Yes. I was 15, oh, I mean 16. I was 16 years old. But before they had time to sentence me, the Japanese moved in. Now what the Japanese did was in fact demagogic, aimed at tricking the people, because they did it to try to show the Vietnamese people that the Japanese were on the side of liberation. They released all political prisoners. They released everyone, except perhaps for a very few, whom they might have moved to another location. I don't know about those people, but they released several hundred political prisoners. I remember when the Japanese carried out their coup, ah, I knew at the time I was arrested that we would carry out a popular insurrection soon.

I: You did?

VK: Yes, I knew, because I knew about the preparations for the insurrection while I was still on the outside, before I was arrested. And after they threw me in jail, I was just waiting for something to happen on the outside. Then, suddenly there was a big demonstration outside the prison, and the demonstrators shouted the slogan, "Independence for Vietnam."

I: When did this demonstration take place? A few months before the Japanese coup?

VK: It was right before the coup, right before the coup. After that demonstration, during which revolutionary slogans had been shouted, ah, they were Viet Minh slogans. After that, I heard just one single gunshot, at night. And then the next morning the Japanese

came pouring in. When we heard the commotion, we thought the situation on the outside, ah, we thought the insurrection had begun.

I: Ah, I see. You did not think it was a Japanese coup.

VK: Right, we didn't think it was a Japanese coup. We thought it was the popular insurrection. And we tore down all the big steel doors. The steel doors had thick bars, like this. We took iron bars and boards from the floor and broke them down.

I: You must have had a lot of people.

VK: Yes, we had 40 or 50 people all in one room.

I: 40 or 50 people in one room?

VK: Yes, all in one big cell. We knew that something big was happening outside and we thought, or at least I thought, that the popular insurrection had begun. So we broke down the door, but before we were able to run out to the big iron gates, Japanese began pouring in. The Japanese came in and they threw rocks at the iron gates, and it sounded like the sound of gunfire.

I: Those were Japanese soldiers who came in?

VK: Yes, Japanese soldiers.

I: And they did not fire their guns?

VK: No. There was just that one, single gunshot, and then the French had immediately surrendered the night before. We had made preparations to escape from that prison. All of us had prepared, and we had torn up our blankets into strips to use to rip out the bars and escape from the citadel. Did you know that there was a citadel, a fort, in Thanh Hoa?

I: And you had been imprisoned inside the citadel, right?

VK: Yes, inside the citadel, which had very high walls. The prison was inside this citadel. So we made preparations to climb over the walls, and we had taken all of our blankets and ripped them into strips. At this time all of the guards had fled. All of them were gone. The soldiers of the French were all gone.

I: Soldiers of the French? But these soldiers were Vietnamese, weren't they?

VK: Yes, they were Vietnamese.

I: And the officers were French?

VK: The officers lived in another location. They lived someplace else, and they only came to the prison every once in a while. But all the guards had either fled or had disguised themselves, meaning that they had taken off their uniforms and put on civilian clothes. At that point, we knew that something really big had happened on the outside, but we did not know that it was just the Japanese. So when we came down, the Japanese began pouring in. I still remember that as we were running out to the gate, just before I got there I fell down, and I had blood all over my clothes. We sent a representative out to negotiate with the Japanese. He said to them, "You guys say you came here to liberate East Asia. We are people who want to liberate Vietnam, so there should not be any problems between us." [Short outside interruption to the interview].

VK: Oh, today you have made me recall so many memories.

I: You remember things very well, and very clearly. And it is very interesting.

VK: I remember ...

I: Did you all have an organization of your own inside the prison, with a leader and subordinate levels?

VK: I am sure that we did. But I was just a new recruit. When I first came into prison I was very immature. When I came in and saw several dozen comrades there, all with the same political leanings as I had, I thought about telling them everything, but then I decided I should keep my mouth shut, because I had kept my mouth shut when being tortured, and I had not told them anything. But when I got into the cell, I thought I could confide in these people, because they were my comrades. I thought I could tell them, but then an old man, a man who had been arrested many times and who had been in and out of prison many times, gave me some skillful indirect words of advice. He said, “You must be careful. You can’t talk about those kinds of things in here, because not every person here is a good person. The enemy has planted his own people in here among us.”

I: So there were informers.

VK: Yes, there were informers. I grew from being a young man who did not understand anything about the revolution, about these kinds of activities, to becoming more mature and a bit wiser. We viewed prison as a place of training.

I: Many other people have said that. Many books say that most of the leaders of the revolution received their training inside French prisons.

VK: Yes, that is right. That means that we gained a better understanding of life and a better understanding of the revolution. So the prisons became our training schools. They steeled our will, made us more mature, and gave us greater knowledge and understanding.

I: After the Japanese released you, they placed you under restrictions, right?

VK: Yes. That meant that once in a while I had to go report in to the district chief.

I: Did you return to live at your uncle’s house?



VK: Yes. I went back to live with my uncle. I was thin, emaciated, and covered with sores. They did not let prisoners work outside, because they were afraid we might try to escape.

I: And that was also the period of the famine in North Vietnam, isn't that right?

VK: Yes. After that, starvation became a really terrible problem. The bodies of people who had starved to death lay all along the sides of the roads.

I: I have heard that. What was the reason for this? Was it that the French confiscated the rice, or was there a drought, or what was the reason?

VK: The primary reason was that the Japanese forced the farmers to pull up their rice crops and instead plant jute. They planted the jute in order to make something or other the Japanese needed.

I: What kind of plant did you say?

VK: Jute. Jute plants. The farmers had to plant jute for the Japanese and then turn their jute crop in to the Japanese. And there were probably other reasons for the starvation as well – a bad rice harvest, or something else. No one provided any aid, and all our crops had to be pulled up in order to plant jute. The level of starvation was unimaginable.

When you opened your front door in the morning, you might see a dead body lying there, right in front of your door. I still remember walking down a road, and if you saw a crow, ah, do you know what a crow is?

I: Yes, I know.

VK: Crows are black. If you saw a big flock of crows, that meant that there was a body lying there. I walked along roads where I saw this kind of thing. There were roads that had so many bodies, especially in Dong Giao, Quan Chao, ah, do you know those places

in Ninh Binh? There were no houses at all in that areas, so the people who were starving who walked along that road had no one they could ask to give them food, and they would just collapse right there along the road. That time of starvation was really horrific. It was absolutely unimaginable.

I: Did anyone in your family die of starvation?

VK: My littlest brother died of starvation back at home, out in the countryside.

I: Back at home?

VK: Yes. The problem of hunger was even worse in my native area than it was in Thanh Hoa.

I: In Thanh Hoa did they still have some rice in the warehouses or something?

VK: In Thanh Hoa the Viet Minh broke into the rice warehouses, stole the rice, and distributed it to the people to eat. But still, in every family many people were hungry. Many of the people were very hungry, but things were not so bad in my family, because we were business people so we still had some money to buy rice. But we still suffered; we still were short of food. Charity organizations used to cook rice gruel every morning and dole it out to the people. People stood in long, long lines to get it. Each person was given one ladle of rice gruel, just enough to dull their hunger.

I: After the Japanese released you from prison, were you still able to maintain contact with the revolution?

VK: Yes. As soon as I got out of prison, I immediately established contact with our organization. I established contact and resumed my activities. I went back to distributing leaflets, etc.

I: You distributed leaflets again?

VK: Yes, I distributed leaflets, I went around proselytizing for the revolution, and I continued my activities. Because the revolution knew my record in prison; they knew what kind of a person I was. Throughout the struggle, the interrogation and the torture, I never disclosed anything. All of the other members of my unit were still in place, still safe. That gave the organization confidence in me and made them trust me, so as soon as I got out I reestablished contact and resumed my regular activities. And because of the trust that they had in me, even though at that time I was only, ah, I was born in 1928, so in 1945 ...

I: You were 17 years old.

VK: Yes, I was 17 years old. So right after we seized control of the government, I was given command of all the militia forces in the entire district.

I: Really? You were in charge of the militia?

VK: Yes, the militia. Even though I was so young, because of their confidence in me, because I had proven to be so loyal to the revolution, I was immediately given what was a rather substantial position.

I: Which district was this?

VK: Nong Cong District.

I: Nong Cong?

VK: Yes. Nong Cong District of Thanh Hoa Province.

I: At that time, about how many people were in your militia organization?

VK: Oh, there were a lot of people. Every village had at least one militia platoon, so in the entire district the total must have been the equivalent of a regiment.

I: A regiment? That means several hundred people, or...

VK: Oh, it was in the thousands.

I: Thousands?

VK: Several thousand. There were a lot of militia members.

I: Even though you were only 17 years old, you were in charge of all of them?

VK: Yes, I was in command of everything.

I: What about weapons? Did you have weapons you captured from the Japanese?

VK: We had a small number of weapons captured from the French, but we used mostly spears and scimitars – like big knives, swords.

I: You had only a few guns?

VK: We had few guns, but later on we made our own firearms. We made hand grenades, and we made our own flintlock rifles. We made them ourselves.

I: Homemade weapons?

VK: Yes, homemade weapons. But we still were relatively well equipped, and the zeal and the fighting spirit of our personnel was truly awesome.

I: This was at the time of the August Revolution, right?

VK: Yes.

I: Did anyone from the central government come down from Hanoi to Thanh Hoa to brief you on the make-up of the new government?

VK: Yes, we received all of that information. A line of communications was established, a new government was formed, and we had a very tight, close-knit organizational structure. And the leaders of the district were intellectuals and revolutionary activists.

Intellectuals who had prestige in the eyes of the people were chosen to serve as the

district chairman and the chairman of the front, which at that time was called the Lien Viet Front [Mặt Trận Liên Việt].<sup>2</sup>

I: You commanded the militia there. At that time did you also organize or begin to build regular army units.

VK: Yes, we had one such unit. Initially it was a platoon, and later it was expanded to become a company. It was permanently on duty, stationed in the district capital, while the rest of the militia members were in units in each one of the villages. As for me, I also set up a production station for us to produce our own rice and to raise cattle and other livestock so that we could be self-sufficient.

I: You did this to cope with the problem of starvation, famine?

VK: I did it to support and feed our troops. As for the famine, by the time the [August] revolution occurred that situation had improved.

I: It had improved. I see. When the proclamation was made on National Independence Day, 2 September [1945], perhaps that was the first time you had ever heard the name Ho Chi Minh. Is that correct?

VK: It was the first time I had ever heard Uncle Ho's voice, but in fact...

I: How did you hear that?

VK: Over the radio. But prior to that, ah, after the [August] insurrection we had begun to learn more about Uncle Ho. To tell the truth, the flames of the Vietnamese revolution had been smoldering for a long, long time. When I was still a boy, just ten years old, I learned that in my district there was a man, a man who later became the district chairman, who had been arrested and sent to a prison exile, in Kontum or someplace I don't know

---

<sup>2</sup> "Liên Việt" was the abbreviation for the front organization. The front's full name was the "Liên Hiệp Quốc Dân Việt Nam" [the National Popular Front of Vietnam].

exactly, but someplace far away. That person made a very deep impression on me, because through him I learned that there was some kind of force, something out there, which was keeping a flame smoldering in our nation's political life. And even though that person had been imprisoned and tortured, his existence still had a powerful effect on youths and on the people. It kept hope alive, so the flame smoldered as we waited for something, for them to rise up. So as I see it, the Vietnamese revolution was the successor, the continuation, of a long historical tradition, a tradition that goes back for thousands of years. As I am sure you are aware, the Vietnamese nation had the Trung sisters, Madame Trieu, Le Loi, Quang Trung...<sup>3</sup>

I: Ngo Quyen.<sup>4</sup>

VK: Yes, and Ngo Quyen. There was never a moment in our history when we gave up our struggle. We have always had this tendency, this drive, to demand our independence and to drive out foreign aggressors. We have had this since ancient times. The August Revolution was a continuation of that tradition. We had an outstanding leader and favorable international conditions, and so the revolution was successful.

I: After the August Revolution, and after Independence Day, 2 September [1945], ah, a short time after these events Chinese troops from Chiang Kaishek's Nationalist Chinese Army entered North Vietnam, right?

VK: That is correct.

---

<sup>3</sup> Names of leaders of Vietnamese resistance movements in the past. The Trung sisters led a rebellion against Chinese occupation in the first century A.D., Madame Trieu led a similar rebellion in the second century A.D., Emperor Le Loi fought a war that drove out a Chinese occupying army in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century, and Emperor Quang Trung (also known as Nguyen Hue) defeated a Chinese army occupying the northern half of Vietnam in the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century.

<sup>4</sup> Ngo Quyen defeated a Chinese army in 931 AD, securing Vietnamese independence for the first time after a thousand years of Chinese rule over Vietnam. He became Vietnam's first emperor.

I: They occupied North Vietnam. Did any Chinese units come down to Thanh Hoa?

VK: Let me think. I believe they did. I don't remember this clearly, but we did have Chinese troops down there. We usually called them "Tàu Phù" [Swollen Chinese].<sup>5</sup>

I: "Tàu Phù"?

VK: Yes, because many of them had swollen feet. I remember that the people called them "Tàu Phù."

I: Did their presence have any effect on your organization and activities? Did they try to sabotage the revolution's organizations? Or did they just occupy the cities?

VK: I don't remember exactly. Ah, I remember now. Later on, they did do that in Thanh Hoa. They set up some installations in plantations and in some hamlets; installations that they planned would do something or other to oppose the revolution. But all these installations were later completely destroyed.

I: And what about in Nong Cong District? Did their presence have any effect out there?

VK: There were some places where they established these installations, because there were many hamlets, farming hamlets, in Nong Cong. So they tried to exploit these locations. But when I commanded the militia forces I personally directed our forces to block the roads leading from those installations into the city.

I: So they were isolated.

VK: Yes, they were isolated. They were like little islands. None of our people supported them. Generally speaking, everyone opposed them.

I: The Viet Minh government controlled the entire region, right? And these installations were like islands in the middle of this sea, right?

---

<sup>5</sup> "Phù" means "swollen," but the word "phù" it also means the disease beriberi. The term "Tàu Phù" may indicate that many of the Chinese occupation troops were suffering from beriberi.

VK: Yes. They were just little, insignificant islands.

I: About how long was it before the Chinese troops withdrew? And did the French return then?

VK: I just cannot remember exactly. I only remember that the Chinese withdrew – just that the Chinese did withdraw.

I: The Chinese withdrew, and after...

VK It was after the incidents in Hanoi.

I: In 1946, right?

VK: Yes, we were told about these incidents. The On Nhu Hau [Ôn Như Hầu] incident,<sup>6</sup> the Nguyen Hai Than [Nguyễn Hải Thần] plot, etc. The people...

I: Were those revolutionary parties able to establish branches of their organization in Thanh Hoa?

VK: They were only able to set up a few bases, what they called hamlets, or small plantations. They were able to bribe the owners with some gold, but they were only able to set up a few of these “islands,” and they weren’t able to accomplish anything.

I: Did your district have a lot of Catholics living in it? Or were there just Buddhists?

VK: We had a number of Catholics. I recall that we had quite a few Catholic churches in the district.

I: Did the Catholics support the revolution?

VK: After the success of the August Revolution, almost all of them supported the revolution.

---

<sup>6</sup> The “On Nhu Hau Incident” involved the disruption of a supposed coup plot against the government being planned by the VNQDD (the Vietnamese Kuomintang party – Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng), a pro-nationalist Chinese political party. Viet Minh police raided the VNQDD headquarters on On Nhu Hau Street in Hanoi on 12 July 1946 and made numerous arrests to break up the alleged “coup plot.”



I: After that time, was the situation in the province and in the district quiet? Or were there any big battles after the French Army began moving back in?

VK: When the resistance war against the French began, there were a number of French Air Force bombing attacks, and French aircraft would fly overhead. We organized ourselves to fight a resistance war. We had our resistance committee. The district committee became the resistance committee. As for the activities of the militia, our militia conducted military training, and they destroyed the roads. They tore down houses to block the roads, and in places they even dug up the roads entirely so that cars, trucks, and tanks could not get by.

I: Thanh Hoa became what was called a safe zone [an toàn khu], right?

VK: Yes. Thanh Hoa was one of the places we called our “rear area.” Thanh Hoa, Nghe An, and Ha Tinh were all part of our big rear area. At that time I know that our military forces used this area to train our troops. They trained troops there, and General Nguyen Son [Nguyễn Sơn] operated in this area.<sup>7</sup>

I: Oh! General Nguyen Son, huh?

VK: Yes, General Nguyen Son.

I: General Nguyen Son was also in the Chinese army.

VK: Yes. General Nguyen Son was a general in the Chinese Army and was also a general in the Vietnamese army.

I: He became the inter-zone commander in the area, right?

---

<sup>7</sup> General Nguyen Son was a Vietnamese revolutionary who was sent to attend the Chinese Whampoa Military Academy during the 1920s. He joined the Chinese Communist Army and participated in famous “Long March” of Mao Zedong’s forces in the mid-1930s. After becoming a general in the Chinese Communist Army, he returned to Vietnam in 1945 and eventually became commander of Inter-Zone 4, which included Thanh Hoa Province. Nguyen Son returned to China in 1950 and served as a general in the Chinese Army for six years before returning again to Vietnam just before his death in 1956.

VK: Yes. He was a very good general.

I: It was Inter-Zone 4, wasn't it?

VK: Yes, Inter-Zone 4. He was very good. He was an excellent scholar as well as an excellent general. He organized the training and formation of military forces that would then be sent to the front lines to fight. And he took the three provinces – Thanh-Nghe-Tinh – and turned them into our rear area.<sup>8</sup> This was because the French had not come back to reoccupy the area, and because the area produced a great deal of rice and had tremendous manpower and material resources we could exploit. So those three provinces became a very big, very powerful rear area. And Nguyen Son was the kind of a man who could stand up in front of a crowd of ten thousand people and talk all day, or half a day, and could keep those ten thousand people enthralled the entire time with his oratory.

I: Did you ever meet Nguyen Son, or did you ever hear him speak?

VK: Yes. I personally listened to Nguyen Son's speeches many times. He would stand up in front of a crowd and speak to ten thousand people at a time.

I: Did you hear him speak in Thanh Hoa City?

VK: No, in Nong Cong District.

I: In Nong Cong?

VK: Yes, right there in Nong Cong. Because he had his headquarters in my district.

I: Really?

VK: Yes. His main headquarters was in the district. Today the district has been divided. It has been split up into two districts, but initially my district was very large. My district at that time also included the area of what is now Trieu Son District. The general had his

---

<sup>8</sup> “Thanh-Nghe-Tinh” was an abbreviation used to designate the area encompassed by the three provinces of *Thanh* Hoa, *Nghe* An, and Ha *Tinh*.

headquarters at Trieu Son. He regularly traveled around the district, and he organized and trained military forces, army troops, in that district. I personally heard him speak. He was good, very good, and his talks were enthralling. Even though he discussed political topics, you could listen to him on and on without ever getting bored. He also could talk about the arts. I have heard that Nguyen Son once talked for half a day about “*The Tale of Kieu*.”<sup>9</sup> He gave this talk to a group of scholars and intellectuals in Thanh Hoa. He talked about Nguyen Du’s book, “*The Tale of Kieu*” – can you imagine a military general who could talk on this subject for half a day? And everyone listened to him intently. He was very talented.

I: How long did you serve as the Nong Cong District Chief of Militia?

VK: From 1945 to the end of 1948.

I: 1948?

VK: Yes.

I: And then what?

VK: It was like this: My work was militia affairs, but I really loved music. I used to take my guitar along with me and I would sing songs to the militia troops. This was because I used to go around to all the different locations in the district to give talks about current affairs, about political and military subjects, to the militia, but when I would talk about politics all the time, my listeners would get bored. So I would sing a song or two to the militia to entertain them.

I: What kind of songs did you sing?

---

<sup>9</sup> “*The Tale of Kieu*,” by Nguyen Du, is the most famous work in Vietnamese literature, and the author Nguyen Du is revered by the Vietnamese as highly as is William Shakespeare in the English-speaking world.

VK: Resistance songs and revolutionary songs; For instance, songs by Van Cao, and songs by the other composers of that period. And when I sang, they all really enjoyed it. I would talk for a while and then sing a song to them. Initially, I only did this to keep them interested in what I had to say, but later on I found that I myself also enjoyed it. I fell in love with music. And, gradually, music became something that I simply could not live without. Gradually, I organize a small group of just three people who would go around performing for the militia personnel in the district.

I: An entertainment unit [đội văn nghệ]?

VK: Yes, an entertainment unit. This was something that we organized ourselves, all on our own. We played guitar ourselves and sang ourselves, and later we serviced the entire province. Because of that, the province Party secretary saw that I had talent, so he transferred me and sent me to study music.

I: Where did you go to study music?

VK: Region 4.

I: Region 4?

I: Yes, Region 4. At that time, they had a song and brass horn group that had previously performed for the French. Those people were really good, really talented. Among this group were some who were trainers, who taught how to read music, the musical notes, etc. And there were also composers, my elders, like Nguyen Van Thuong [Nguyễn Văn Thương] and Le Yen [Lê Yên]. I studied under these people. I was given what was called a short course. This was because the province secretary recognized the artistic requirement, and because he recognized that I had a gift for music, so he transferred me there so I could become a musician.

I: How long was this short course that you attended?

VK: About six months, but those six months were tremendously exciting to me. And after the six-month course, I organized a group made up of three people. The other two members of the group are now dead. One of these two was a musician named Minh Hien [Minh Hiến]. Minh Hien was from a noble family.

I: Really? He was from the royal family?

VK: Yes, he was the child of a family of royal blood, but he had joined the resistance. The second person was Hai Chau [Hải Châu]. This man had never studied at all, but he had a real gift for music, and he was a very good singer. So the three of us organized a team [đội] to do down to operate in the Binh Tri Thien area.<sup>10</sup> We snuck down into the area under enemy occupation, the area occupied by the French. At that time the French occupied Quang Binh, Quang Tri, and Thua Thien provinces.

I: So you went all the way down to Tri Thien?

VK: All the way! We were organized into this three-man team. We traveled throughout this zone, moving surreptitiously, and there was not a single night during which we got a solid, good night's sleep. Every night there was an alert or a warning of some kind, and then the next morning we would move on.

I: When you traveled, did you have any soldiers escorting you?

VK: No.

I: No. You traveled all alone?

VK: It was just the three of us. We just walked there and there, and everywhere we went we would hold a performance. We'd compose music, write songs...

---

<sup>10</sup> "Binh Tri Thien" was an abbreviation used to refer to the area encompassed by the provinces of Quang *Binh*, Quang *Tri*, and Thua *Thien*.

I: And you had no weapons?

VK: We had no weapons at all.

I: Oh, that was very risky! That was risky.

VK (laughing): But there was something very interesting and wonderful about this. Even though we were in a combat area where the fighting was very ferocious, every night we would organize a performance, and we would always draw big crowds. All the people would come to hear us – large numbers of people.

I: And they never caught you?

VK: No, they never caught us. We just snuck around, always concealing ourselves amongst the local population. And the people came to see us – big crowds of people. At night when we performed all the lights had to be covered, because there would always be a French outpost very close by. They could have fired their guns directly into the places where we were performing. But still big crowds of people came to see us. And the songs I sang weren't very good, and we did not harmonize well, but we would tell stories, we would chant poetry, we would sing, and we would write songs. For instance, during this time I wrote the song, "*Bình Trị Thiên Quật Khởi*" [Bình Trị Thiên Rises Up].

I: So that was when you began to write songs?

VK: Yes, I had begun to compose songs by then. And we sang to the people, and they loved it. They considered us to be "honored guests." Wherever we went they fed us very well, and they treated us very well.

I: And you walked from Quang Binh all the way down?

VK: Yes, all the way down to the outskirts of Hue City. I spent the night along the banks of the river on the outskirts of Hue, and we ate local dishes cooked and brought out to us

from inside Hue city. Even though the area was considered to be under enemy occupation, people continued to go in and out of the area, just like normal. We stayed in the home of a local resident, and they fed us special dishes cooked in Hue and carried out of the city to us. In fact, Musician Nguyen Huu Ba [Nguyễn Hữu Ba] even sent a gift, a violin, out to us from inside Hue City. At that time Ba was living inside the city.

[videotape ends]

**Oral History Interview of Van Ky [Vãn Ký]  
DVD 09  
Hanoi, 7 June 2007**

**I – Interviewer Merle Pribbenow  
VK – Van Ky**

I: So someone sent out a violin for you from inside Hue City?

VK: Yes. It was Musician Nguyen Huu Ba.

I: Did any of the three of you know how to play the violin?

VK: Yes. Mr. Hai Chau. As for me, I played the guitar.

I: You played the guitar?

VK: Yes. I carried my guitar with me. Hai Chau knew how to play the violin. And Hai Chau's wife was still living in Hue City.

I: Really?

VK: Yes. His wife and children were very attractive. His wife was extremely beautiful, and his children were very cute. They came out of the city to visit him, and every day his wife sent out cigarettes – *Phillip Morris* brand – and other things for her husband.

I: Oh, you must have treasured them, because at that time cigarettes were very scarce.

VK: Yes, they were very scarce. She also sent out newspapers and magazines, like *Readers Digest*, for Hai Chau, because Hai Chau could speak English. Our journey was difficult, since we had to wade through flooded rice paddies and scale steep mountain slopes, but we studied English as we walked. I still remember one of the sentences he taught me: [In English] “I have a surprise for you in my pocket.” [I and VK both laugh] “I have a surprise for you in my pocket.”

I: Why did you want to study English way back then?

VK: We were preparing ourselves.



I: What were you preparing for?

VK: We were preparing for after the war was over. We planned to make international [foreign] contacts, and we would continue our music studies...

I: You planned to make foreign contacts?

VK: And we planned many other things as well. We were still very young at that time.

I: So you began working in the entertainment group around 1948, or...?

VK: Around 1949. From late 1949 through 1950, and in 1950 I returned to the free zone.<sup>11</sup> You remember that Thanh-Nghe-Tinh<sup>12</sup> was a free zone, but Binh Tri Thien<sup>13</sup> was occupied. We operated for almost one year in the occupied zone. We snuck around continuously, and there were many times when we never got one single full night's sleep, because every night someone would shout, "French sweep" [tây càn]. They said the French were coming out to conduct a sweep of the area, and we would have to leave immediately. Hai Chau wrote a song, ah, people had a code word they used. They would say, "the buffaloes are out" [trâu ra]. That meant that the French were coming. And when we heard that, we would run. Everyone, all the village residents, would run away to another location. So Hai Chau wrote a song titled "*Trâu Ra*" [The Buffaloes Are Out], and everywhere we went this song received great applause. It was a very funny song and a very entertaining song.

I: Yes, it satirized the French.

VK: Yes, the song satirized them. And it also described an activity that everyone knew and understood. So especially when he would sing the line, "*Trâu ra, trâu ra, hỡi đồng bào ơi*" [The buffaloes are out! Compatriots, the buffaloes are out!], everyone always

---

<sup>11</sup> The "free zone" was the Viet Minh-controlled zone.

<sup>12</sup> Thanh Hoa, Nghe An, and Ha Tinh provinces.

<sup>13</sup> Quang Binh, Quang Tri, and Thua Thien provinces.

loved that line (I laughs). Hai Chau had another song, “*Qua Đường Quốc Lộ*” [Crossing the Highway], because we often had to cross the highway to go back up to the war zone [the Viet Minh base area].<sup>14</sup> We had to cross the highway. “*Qua Đường Quốc Lộ*” was another song that people really liked. All three of us used to sing that song.

I: Because very often crossing the highway could be a real problem, right? It was very dangerous.

VK: It was extremely dangerous, but in the song we had a few lines that went like this: “*đi, chưa chắc là thấy*”, meaning that when we crossed, the French might not spot us; “*thấy, chưa chắc là bắn*”, meaning if they saw us, they might not shoot at us; and “*bắn, chưa chắc là trúng*”, meaning if they shot at us, they might not hit us (I laughs). So we would just go ahead and cross the road, taking our chances.

I: That was dangerous. And after this, you returned to the free zone?

VK: Yes, we went back to the free zone<sup>15</sup> after operating for some time in the occupied areas. But I remained behind in Quang Tri, in the Quang Tri war zone, to form an entertainment group [đoàn văn nghệ] for that province. Minh Hien and I remained behind to put together that entertainment group. We stayed there for an additional three months, and then we returned to the free zone. And when we reached the free zone, oh, the atmosphere there was wonderful!

I: Because you could live again without worry, you could be at ease.

VK: We could be comfortable, because we no longer had anything to worry about. We could go down to the river and go out on a boat, and people would fish and bring us fresh fish to eat. Life there truly was free, and freedom is something that is absolutely

---

<sup>14</sup> The “Highway” [Quốc Lộ] refers to National Route 1, running north-south along the coast of Vietnam.

<sup>15</sup> The “free zone” meant the Viet Minh-controlled Thanh Hoa-Nghe An-Ha Tinh area.

priceless, even though that freedom was enjoyed during a time of war. Still, the free zone was wonderful.

I: At that time you were about 25 or 26 years old, right?

VK: That was around 1940 or 1950, so I was around that age – 25 or 26 years old.

I: And at that time you were still single? You hadn't yet gotten married?

VK: Not yet. But later on, when we went to a performance, I'm sorry, I mean when we went to teach songs to the Nghe An Women's Association, there was a girl there who seemed to be very interested in my song – I went there to teach the women a song I had written. Anyhow, there I met a very pretty girl with a very nice, lovable personality who seemed to really enjoy singing my song. That singing class resulted in the two of us falling in love with each other, and we became husband and wife.

I: How long did you know each other before you got married?

VK: It was not very long. Perhaps ten months.

I: Ten months was fairly long, because it was wartime, and people had to...

VK: My wife came from a rather well to do family; a well-to-do family that owned property in Vinh City. Even though they had their own villa in Vinh, they wanted their daughter to marry a revolutionary. When they learned that I was a revolutionary cadre,

...

I: That was in the free zone?

VK: Yes, in the free zone. It was in Nghe An. And I was active in Poet Luu Trong Lu's [Luu Trọng Lu] organization. Do you know of Luu Trong Lu? He wrote a very good poem titled, "*Tiếng Thu*" [Autumn's Voice], and I was the one who wrote music for it and turned this poem into a song. That poem was put on exhibit in the French museum.

The poem “*Tiếng Thu*” shows the value, the stature of Vietnamese poetry. That poem is worthy of being compared to the work of the best poets in the entire world. So that poet [Luu Trong Lu] presided over my wedding, and he was also the Chief of the Region 4 Artists Association [Hội Văn Nghệ], of which I was a member. So we were married in that kind of environment, and Luu Trong Lu was a wonderful man. He was always a poet, every minute of his life, and he was a man with a strange and wonderful soul. He seemed to live with his head in the clouds. He was always up there in the clouds.

I: And you said that at that time Luu Trong Le was the chief...

VK: He was the chief of the Inter-Zone 4 Artists Association. All of the artists, like Minh Hien and Thanh Thinh [Thành Thịnh] were members. You have probably heard of Thanh Thinh, haven't you? He was a very famous writer, and he used to travel with my entertainment group [đoàn văn nghệ]. Later on my entertainment group was very large. It had Thanh Thinh, Dinh Quan, who later became Deputy Minister of Culture, etc. Thanh Thinh had a thing he would do – he would put on a solo performance. He would tell stories. He'd tell stories for an hour to crowds of ten thousand or more, and the audience always loved it. Thanh Thinh had a real talent for storytelling. He could make a story come alive, and when you listened you felt it was real. My group used many different methods to get close to and engage the masses and to say the things to them that we needed to say.

I: So did you work in the Inter-Zone 4 Entertainment Group until the end of the resistance war against the French?

VK: Yes, until 1954 – until after the Dien Bien Phu Campaign ended. We went out to support all of the [military] campaigns – the Dien Bien Phu Campaign, the Northwest

Campaign,<sup>16</sup> etc. We went along with the civilian coolie laborers [dân công] assigned to support the different campaigns. These were the coolie labor groups that followed the army up into the mountains...

I: So the entertainment group went along?

VK: Yes, we accompanied them. We went along to entertain them as they worked to support the effort.

I: So you went along with them to take part in the Northwest Campaign?

VK: Yes.

I: And the Hoa Binh Campaign?<sup>17</sup>

VK: Yes. I even wrote a song titled, “*Chiến Thắng Hòa Bình*” [Hoa Binh Victory]. That song is still being sung today.

I: I have heard that the fighting in Hoa Binh was ferocious. Is that right?

VK: Yes, it was ferocious, but the campaign opened up a corridor that connected our rear area to our war zone. This was a very significant campaign. So that victory ...

I: You must have endured some very arduous conditions when you accompanied those coolie labor groups, right?

VK: We got used to hardships and arduous conditions. Shortages and hunger were common, every-day occurrences. But we always had rice to eat, so we never starved. In wartime things were different. People did not think about themselves, about their own personal lives. I remember that when my group traveled, we would encounter little restaurants called “Soldiers’ Mothers’ Restaurant” [Quán Bà Mẹ Chiến Sĩ]. They cooked

---

<sup>16</sup> The Northwest Campaign, October-December 1952), was a multidivisional operation into the extreme northwestern corner of North Vietnam.

<sup>17</sup> The Hoa Binh Campaign, December 1951-February 1952, was a multidivisional operation in the Hoa Binh-Route 6 area southwest of Hanoi.

food, and cadres passing by could just stop in for a meal without having to pay for it.

They said, “Don’t worry about. Just continue on your journey.” We were supported and fed in that manner. There were mothers who would bring food out to these restaurants; sometimes they would even bring food from their own family’s food stocks, and cadres passing by could just stop in to eat. It was wonderful. We imagined that we were all part of one big, enormous family.

I: The entire country was one family.

VK: Yes, one family. The “soldiers’ mothers” loved us as if we were their very own children. When my wife gave birth, the soldiers’ mothers cared for our baby. This is my child who is now an associate professor and Deputy Director of the Hanoi Music Institute.

I: Is that so?

VK: That is my oldest child. That child was fed and cared for by these mothers. At that time no one thought anything of it.

I: Back then, every time you had to go off on one of these trips you had to be separated from your wife and family, right?

VK: Yes, I was gone all the time.

I: That was very hard on your wife.

VK: Yes. And there were times when people went hungry, like when there were floods. There was no rice to eat, and people had to eat vegetables. This was especially true during the period just before the war ended. There were times when conditions were very harsh, very difficult.

I: I have heard that during the Dien Bien Phu Campaign, Thanh Hoa Province shipped virtually all the rice it had up to support the military campaign, right?

VK: Yes – “Everything for the front lines.” The coolies who carried the rice also had to eat it during the journey. To deliver, say, one picule<sup>18</sup> [tə] of rice, they would also have eaten about the same amount during the journey. It was a tremendous achievement. The French probably never imagined that in the Dien Bien basin, surrounded by such rugged mountain jungle terrain, that the Vietnamese army could have built a supply road to support their forces.

I: When you read the memoirs of the French generals, they say that they believed that the Viet Minh could not sustain a large armed force in such a remote location.

VK: And they thought that if we did come, they would destroy us. They were setting a trap, and if our army came, they would destroy us, because they were many times more powerful than we were.

I: The supply route from Thanh Hoa and Nghe An up to Dien Bien Phu was very long.

VK: Yes, very long, and it consisted of trails through jungles and mountains.

I: And there were no trucks, no vehicles...

VK: Right. All we had were transport bicycles, but each bicycle could carry a load of more than three picules.<sup>19</sup> One bicycle carrying as much as a small car. The coolies just pushed the bicycles...

I: Where did these bicycles come from? Did you manufacture them yourselves?

VK: They were probably just old bicycles, from the earlier period. Then people welded on attachments - racks to carry supply loads and handles to use to push the bicycles. I

---

<sup>18</sup> One picule was equal to 60 kilograms.

<sup>19</sup> I.e., more than 180 kilograms.

recall that one bicycles carried a load of 3.2 picules, and these bicycles were pushed all the way from Thanh Hoa up to Dien Bien Phu.

I: Did you yourself get all the way up to Dien Bien Phu?

VK: No, I did not go all the way up there. I got only as far as Hoa Binh, or close to Hoa Binh. I just worked along the road and did not get up to Dien Bien Phu. That was outside of my assigned operating area and I had no orders to go up there.

I: So you only worked along a section of the road.

VK: Yes, along one specific section of road. I remember that as we traveled, I gave performances to entertain the coolie laborers, and at the same time I also composed new songs.

I: During that period, did the French bomb that area a lot?

VK: They bombed all along the road. Anywhere security was breached, anywhere our forces were spotted, they would bomb that place immediately.

I: Were a lot of people killed?

VK: A number of people were killed, but the numbers weren't too high. They were able to keep the supply route open.

I: You used trails, and not the main roads, right?

VK: Yes, all trails – we mainly used trails. I remember that I also went out to support the Central Laos Campaign<sup>20</sup> and the Upper [Northern] Laos Campaign.<sup>21</sup>

I: Central Laos? When was that? Around 1953?

---

<sup>20</sup> The Central Laos Campaign, fought in the Savannakhet-Kham Moun area, lasted from December 1953 to May 1954.

<sup>21</sup> The Upper or Northern Laos Campaign, in the Sam Neua-Xieng Khoang area, was fought April-May 1953.



VK: Yes, sometime circa 1953. I remember because by that time I had become the chief of the entertainment group.

I: did you go all the way to Laos?

VK: Almost – almost to the Lao border.

I: Almost to the Lao border?

VK: Yes, right up to the border.

I: Did the civilian coolie laborers carry the rice and supplies up to some specified way station, and then the army would pick the supplies up and carry them on into Laos? Or did the coolie laborers carry the supplies all the way to the front lines?

VK: I think they only took the supplies far enough to deliver it to the army – just to a place where troops were stationed. They were supplying the troops so they could fight. The peasants made a tremendous contribution, both in terms of manpower and of material resources – a truly massive contribution. And we can see that this was also a closed, tightly controlled effort, where secrecy was so tight that if a single spy entered a hamlet, he immediately be detected. Any stranger who showed up would be detected immediately. So the shared will, the sympathy and support of the people, were incredible. And there were battles of wits, and here I would like to talk also about the period of the struggle against the Americans – Excuse me for this, but we have now become friends, and this story is the truth. There was a period of four years when we were engaged in a battle of wits against the Americans. The U.S. thought that it was dropping in supplies and recruiting and building an organization in the Northwestern

region of our country, but in fact everything was under our control, Vietnamese control. And the Americans didn't know it.<sup>22</sup>

I: Yes, I have read about these things. Did you participate in this effort?

VK: No. This is a story from the Northwestern region of our country, and from the army. But I do know that even after four years the Americans thought that their commandos were still operating in that area, and they continued to drop in supplies...

I: And they also dropped additional personnel as reinforcements.

VK: They dropped in replacement personnel, and money, and rice, and canned food, and all types of supplies – even weapons. And they still didn't know. It was only at some later point in time that they finally realized the truth. They only realized the truth afterwards, when those kinds of operations were no longer needed. So in this war there were a lot of strange, unusual stories.

I: During the war against the French, the civilian coolie labor groups had to transport supplies to remote areas, way up in the mountains. The French organized teams of ethnic minority tribesmen, what you called “tribal bandits” [phi]. Did those teams cause problems for the supply effort, or did they obstruct the supply lines?

VK: There were tribal bandits later on, but as far as I know they were not much of a problem during the war against the French. The French did try to conduct some sabotage operations, but they were unsuccessful. The French efforts were unsuccessful because of the tremendous solidarity of our people. If something unusual, something strange appeared, or if there was an indication of opposition, it would be detected immediately,

---

<sup>22</sup> This is a reference to the covert U.S.-South Vietnamese program in the early and mid-1960s to infiltrate intelligence and paramilitary personnel into North Vietnam to collect intelligence and to carry out sabotage missions. See Sedgwick Tourison, “Secret Army, Secret War,” Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, MD, 1995, and Dale Andrade and Kenneth Conboy, “Spies and Commandos: How America Lost the Secret War in North Vietnam,” University Press of Kansas, Lawrence, KS, 2000.

and it would be annihilated [destroyed]. Either that or there would be a “fake elimination” [tiêu diệt giả], meaning that we turned these people around and used them against the enemy. So the strength of our solidarity was fantastic, and when the people understood the purpose, the objective of what they were doing, where they were going, ah, and when our words of explanation were persuasive – when we talked about the scourge of starvation, about the plight of slaves [subjects of colonial rule], they digested what we said, and this became a great strength for us.

I: Do you remember the day that the victory at Dien Bien Phu was announced? Where were you? What happened?

VK: At that time I was in Thanh Hoa. I was in Thanh Hoa – ah, I’m sorry, I was in Region 4. This was something that I never imagined could have happened so soon, because there were things that we didn’t know. We knew what was going on in Region 4, but what the status of military operations was, and what was going on up there, we had no way of knowing.

I: You could listen to the news every day on the radio, and you knew what was happening on the propaganda front.

VK: And that is all. All that we knew was that the French had build an extremely strong military position at Dien Bien Phu, for various reasons, and that they had placed extremely powerful forces there. Other than that, we didn’t know. It was a military matter, and military secrets were kept very tight, absolutely secret. So all of a sudden, like a bolt out of the blue, we learned that we had won victory at Dien Bien Phu.

I: The civilian population was probably very happy, right?

VK: Yes, they were extremely joyful. This was an unbelievable victory. This was something beyond the bounds of our imaginations. No one could figure out how we could have defeated such a powerful force, such a powerful army.

I: It probably even surprised your own cadres, right?

VK: Yes – those of us in the rear areas were surprised too. Our military preparations were kept so secret that we just did not know.

I: After you heard this news, were you certain that the war was almost over?

VK: After that there were the negotiations, which became protracted, and people were only waiting for one sentence: “The French have admitted defeat.” When would the French finally admit defeat? That was something we just didn’t know. And when it happened, we were overjoyed. Naturally we were overjoyed. The war was over.

I: At that time you already had a wife and children, right?

VK: Yes. I had one child.

I: One child. A son? At that time did you reestablish contact with your family, I mean with your parents and siblings?

VK: Yes, by that time I had reestablished contact with them, and my family had left our native village and fled down to our area, down to Region 4.

I: To Region 4? At that time, where were you living in Region 4?

VK: I was living in Nghe An.

I: In Nghe An?

VK: Yes, and my family fled down to our area because they had been living in our village, which was only ten kilometers from Nam Dinh city, and my native village had been razed to the ground.

I: Really?

VK: Yes. My village had become part of a “white zone” perimeter [vòng đai trắng].

I: Ah, a “white zone perimeter.” That was a French policy, right?

VK: Yes, it was a French policy. This was because my area was an area of intense guerrilla activity, so they just flattened everything – razed everything to the ground. So my family fled down to our area.

I: So they must have lost all their property. They must have lost everything.

VK: Naturally. They had nothing left. But when they got down to our area, they were able to rely on the help of the local people to keep them alive. So they went hungry sometimes, but they made it. And then after the war ended they returned.

I: They returned to...?

VK: They returned home. My younger siblings and my mother returned to our native village.

I: In your family, aside from you, did any of your family members join the revolution? Did anyone else become a cadre, or become a soldier?

VK: Yes. One of my younger brothers joined the army, but he became a truck driver.

I: A driver, huh? He must have been sent all the way up to the [Chinese] border, right?

VK: He went to various places. He was involved in supply operations, because he drove a truck. The reason only one of my younger brothers became a soldier was that my other brother was not healthy enough to be able to join the army. Anyone who was healthy enough had to join the army. At that time it was considered an honor to be allowed to join the army, because people wanted to participate in the fighting.

I: After the Geneva Agreement was signed, and after the French left, what did you do?  
Did you continue with your entertainment work?

VK: After the war ended, a culture and entertainment congress [đại hội văn công] was held in Hanoi. The congress was held to celebrate our victory over France. This congress brought together all the entertainment groups from throughout our nation.

I: Including those from South Vietnam?

VK: Yes, including those from South Vietnam. I was the chief of the Inter-Zone 4 culture and entertainment group. At that time we had a dance troop, a group to perform traditional operas and plays, a group to perform Vietnamese operas, traditional dancers, etc., all organized into one group. So we went up and performed in Hanoi, and I was the chief of the group. A number of the songs I had composed, ah, I wrote some musical skits, like “*Dân Công Lên Đường*” [Coolie Laborers March Out], and I composed the music, and there were actors playing coolie laborers carrying the long poles with baskets of rice on both ends, and there was singing and dancing. We performed at the big City Opera House, and I won an award. The musicians up here in Hanoi, people like Van Cao [Văn Cao] and Nguyen Xuan Khoat [Nguyễn Xuân Khoát] – well-known musicians and composers – noticed my work and wanted to keep me up here in Hanoi. Then I was reassigned to prepare to form the Vietnam Musicians Association [Hội Nhạc Sĩ Việt Nam]. So I moved up here from Nghe An, ah, Thanh Hoa, no, I mean Nghe An. At that time I had a small house down there, only ten square meters, so I gave the house to a friend and moved up to Hanoi. At that time I had only one - I’m sorry, I had two children.

I: Two children?

VK: Yes. One of my children was only a few months old. So I came up here and began to prepare to become a cadre of the Musicians Association. At that time the Musicians Association had not yet been formed. So I became a resident of Hanoi, and I helped form the Musicians Association, and I worked on Musicians Association activities, and I was a leader of the Musicians Association, and I became a member of the Current Affairs Committee, and I studied with foreign experts from Russia and China. I attended classes here in Vietnam, and I was also sent abroad to study outside the country.

I: Did you study abroad for a long time?

VK: For three years.

I: Three years?

VK: Yes, in the former Soviet Union. The place where I studied was at the Kazakhstan Music Academy.

I: Kazakhstan? Oh, that is a long way from Moscow.

VK: Yes, it is a long way away, but I was sent there because their music is similar to Vietnamese music. They have a five-note type of music, “pentatonic” [in English] music that is very similar to Vietnam’s music, so that is where I wanted to study. However, most of the professors were Russians. The Russians taught everything. So that is where I got my regular, formal music education. Before that I studied here in Vietnam. After peace was restored, I studied with foreign experts from Russia and China who had come here to teach music at the university level. After I finished the university-level program in Hanoi, I went to Kazakhstan for an internship. It was like being a researcher, but they called me an intern [thực tập sinh]. This was at the graduate level, above university level. At that time I began writing a number of major compositions. I wrote one composition, a

“suite,” about the Vietnam War. The National Orchestra of Germany and the National Orchestra of Russia performed this suite, and it was presented at the International Music Festival. This suite was published, 150 pages of music in large format, for presentation by large orchestras. So thanks to the revolution, I was able to become a professional musician.

I: You became a musician with an international reputation.

VK: Yes, there are those who know about me.

I: Was your composition about the war against the Americans?

VK: Yes. I began working in the Vietnam Musicians Association in 1957. That was the year the Vietnam Musicians Association was established. I was appointed as a member of the Current Affairs Committee [the Standing Committee] responsible for forming and building this organization. At that time there was something that many people did not understand. Vietnam’s Music Institute [or Music Academy] was not formed until very late – it is now only about 50 years old – but the University of Art [đại học mỹ thuật] was established very early on. I do not understand the reason for this. It was a loss for Vietnamese music, because it could not be brought into the Arts and Sciences University at an earlier time. However, the strange thing is that because of the needs of the war, the needs of the revolution, Vietnamese musicians studied and learned on their own, and they were able to do everything. Naturally, they were only able to do little things initially, and only later on were they able to accomplish big things.

I: They did not get any formal training, but they trained themselves.



VK: Yes, they trained themselves. Well-known artists like Luu Huu Phuoc [Luu Hữu Phước] were self-taught, and Van Cao [Văn Cao] was mostly self-taught, and both of them became very famous.

I: During the years of the American bombing campaign, were you in Hanoi or were you studying in Russia?

VK: I was in Hanoi part of that time, and a bomb hit as close to my house as from here to the gate of this compound.<sup>23</sup> I remember that when the bomb was dropped, one of my doors was blown off. One of my doors was broken by the blast.

I: Was anyone injured?

VK: No. Fortunately, I had just returned to my house from that very location. I had just returned home from that place.

I: Were your wife and children at home?

VK: Yes, but no one was hurt. The only people hurt were at the place where the bomb hit. The bombing was very close to my house. This just goes to show that fate is very important in war. If I had been just a little slower in returning home, I might not be sitting here with you today. (laughs) We would never have met each other.

I: What year was that? During the 1960s, or...?

VK: It was 1960-something, ah, I think it was 1968. 1968 or 1969. It must have been 1968. Maybe 67 or 68. I just don't remember exactly. Actually, I was supposed to have left the city in the evacuation. People were not supposed to be living here, but I just did not want to leave Hanoi, so I, along with my family, stayed here. My wife worked at a pharmaceutical company.

I: Pharmaceutical?

---

<sup>23</sup> Interviewer's Comment: A distance of about 25 meters.

VK: Yes. They were still operating here.

I: So the company did not evacuate?

VK: A portion of the company did evacuate, but another portion remained here and continued production here.

I: Was the company bombed?

VK: Not here, and it wasn't bombed at its other locations either. They evacuated and dispersed, so they avoided being bombed. We stayed in Hanoi, and every time there was an air raid warning I would take cover under the staircase in my house. We viewed it as our air raid bunker.

I: I have heard that back then every house had to have a hole in the ground in which to take shelter.

VK: Yes. Along the streets, they dug small holes all along the streets, and when there was an air raid warning people would jump into the holes. Taking cover that way meant it was more difficult to avoid being hurt, but people still would take cover in the holes.

And the people of Hanoi continued to carry out their normal, every-day activities. My child, who had been forced to evacuate from the city into the countryside, snuck back into the city. He missed Hanoi so much that he kept sneaking back into the city to come home. And then I'd have to take him back out to the evacuation site. Children did not want to be separated from their parents, and many people did not want to leave Hanoi.

I: At that time how old was your son?

VK: At that time my oldest was still in the elementary level of training. He was at the Music Institute, but at the lower level, the elementary level.

I: High school?

VK: Yes. And my other three children stayed with the parents. We evacuated to a village in the countryside, about 50 or 60 kilometers from Hanoi. We lived in one of the houses of the local residents.

I: Probably out there you weren't used to those conditions, and everyone missed Hanoi.

VK: Naturally, so we kept coming back, even though it was dangerous. Everyone missed Hanoi, so they kept coming back. Back then most of us working in the entertainment field were evacuated up to the Ha Bac area.

I: To Ha Bac? Did you all still perform regular entertainment programs?

VK: Yes. They went all over to put on performances. But here [in Hanoi] was the place to which cadres would return after going out on their assignments, because their families were here. We still received supplies, and we had cars to take us back and forth. After a while I moved the entire Musicians Association to one single place. It was a very beautiful place, in Son Tay as I recall. We moved to Son Tay. I didn't want to stay in the home of a local resident, so I build a small hut, about the size of this room, with an oil-tar roof. It was located under a big tree. I put a piano in the hut and continued to work, just as always.

I: So you had a piano up there?

VK: Yes. We took everything with us.

I: Really? You must have had some trucks.

VK: Yes, we did. We had everything we needed. And my children dug a bunker. If it had taken a direct hit we probably would not have survived, but if the bomb hit anywhere else we would be safe. I remember I went up there, ah, it was an area, ah, it is now an ancient historic village. It is very famous. I'm trying to remember the name, but it's an

ancient historic village. It is where Nguyen Cao Ky comes from. It is Nguyen Cao Ky's native area.<sup>24</sup>

I: During the American bombing campaign in 1972, did your family remain in Hanoi or did you evacuate out of the city?

VK: In 1972, let me see. I'm trying to remember. 1972 – yes, we did evacuate the city, but we continued our work. In 1972 I evacuated to the Bac Giang area.

I: Bac Giang?

VK: Yes. During that time I wrote a play, a musical, for the Bac Giang Province Culture and Entertainment Group to perform. And the performers traveled throughout the rural countryside putting on the play, and I performed in the musical for the provincial group. Later I also performed a musical for the Nam Dinh, Nam Ha Province<sup>25</sup> entertainment group. We continued our regular activities – we traveled around giving performances, and we wrote new compositions, etc.

I: Did you sometimes organize musical performances for broadcast over the radio?

VK: Yes, we put on performances that were recorded for broadcast on the radio. The radio continued its normal operations. For instance, in 1958 [sic], when I wrote the song, “*Hy Vọng*” [Hope], I recorded it over at the place on Quan Su Street, where the radio station is still headquartered. As for the bombing, when there was an air raid warning, we all ran down into the bunker. Aside from that, everything else was the same. After the bombers left, everything continued on as normal. People got used to it. And this kind of work could not have been carried out outside the capital. For instance, it would have

---

<sup>24</sup> General Nguyen Cao Ky was the Prime Minister (1965-1967) and later the Vice President (1967-1971) of South Vietnam.

<sup>25</sup> Nam Dinh province was for some years (during the 1970s-1980s) merged with Ha Tay province; the new province was called Nam Ha.

been difficult to set up this kind of modern recording studio, a place that met all the technical standards, in another location.

I: It would have been difficult to meet the requirements out in the countryside.

VK: We needed to have the right sound characteristics in the studio, and we needed modern machines and equipment. So we continued to make our recordings in Hanoi.

We continued to work as usual. Naturally, there were some places that were hit by bombs, but this location was never hit. The most dangerous time for me was when I was at home and the bomb exploded outside and blew a door off. The concussion also broke a bunch of our dishes.

I: It was a coincidence, an accident. I don't know what they were trying to bomb, but when they dropped...

VK: Perhaps their intent was to try to frighten Hanoi. The Americans wanted to show us that they could even attack our capital city. They probably only wanted to send that message to us, that's all. But they just dropped the bombs blindly, dropping them on civilian residential areas.

I: Sometimes when they were getting shot at from the ground, the pilots would get scared, and to evade the gunfire they would just jettison their bombs...

VK: Yes, that is possible, but it is also possible that they wanted to attack the downtown area in order to attack our nerve center.

I: Was your house in the center of town?

VK: Yes – on Hue Street.

I: Hue Street?

VK: Yes.

I: That is right in the heart of the city.

VK: Yes, on Hue Street, just a short distance from the Lake of the Returned Sword [Hồ Hoàn Kiếm]. Those bombing raids came at a time when the Americans probably wanted Hanoi to be on edge and to be frightened. But Hanoi was not frightened (laughs). That is why we are here today – because we had mentally prepared ourselves in advance for just this kind of thing. Uncle Ho told us at the very start of the war, “The war may become protracted, and our capital city of Hanoi may be destroyed, but we are not afraid.” So Uncle Ho prepared us ahead of time for this. He told us this at the very beginning, before anything...

I: And he proclaimed this to the entire world.

VK: Yes, he said it to the entire world. Therefore, to our people this was nothing strange or unexpected. They were not frightened or confused.

I: They were prepared...

VK: Yes, they had prepared. And freedom for men and women – the concept of freedom and independence – “There is nothing more precious than independence and freedom” – that idea had penetrated deep into the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people, to the point that we could not live without freedom. We could not live without independence. Especially those from the generations like my own, for us this was a profound feeling that permeated our very souls, because we knew what slavery really was.

I: Probably today the younger generations have a hard time imagining what slavery is really like.

VK: Yes, it might be difficult for them. This is something that I feel we should pay more attention to, because people might forget, because it is something that they have never

seen or experienced. They do not know what it is like. There are even some things that we say that they refuse to believe. Sometimes when my generation talks to them about these things, the young people say, “That is unbelievable. How could life have been like that?” They cannot understand it. So I think this is a real problem.

I: That is one of the goals of these interviews, because in the U.S. as well, the younger generations do not understand what the Vietnam War was like, what the situation was like, or why a tiny country like Vietnam was able to fight against such a large, powerful country. It is probably the same here in Vietnam. Life is more focused on material things than on spiritual things. The professor who established this program wants to have a documentary archive so that future generations of students can understand, so that they can see and hear with their own eyes and ears what the spirit of the ones who conducted the revolution was like, and hear what the thoughts of those revolutionaries were about the war. Vietnam probably needs this same kind of thing as well.

VK: Yes. I think this will be a real problem for future generations. People need to profoundly understand the humiliation of losing one’s country and the humiliation of slavery. They need to understand that there is a choice, and that sacrificing one’s life and dying a glorious, honorable death on the battlefield is better than to starving to death. Of these two paths, which one will they choose? So for my generation the choice is very clear. I am just worried that in the future our children and our grandchildren may not remember this lesson. And I myself find something very strange – Why did the Americans rely on a government, a power, that had no prestige, and at the same time they abandoned an ally, or a potential ally. You are someone who has studied this, so you probably already know this, but if my memory is not mistaken, from the time of the war

against the Japanese fascists, Uncle Ho seems to have wanted to join hands with the U.S., but the Americans did not respond to his overtures. That is something that I cannot understand, and that I greatly regret. If there had been a deep understanding of Uncle Ho's good faith, perhaps this war would never have been fought and then so many things could have been avoided. But the Americans did not believe him. The Americans would not join hands with him. Instead, the U.S. joined hands with another power, another force, one that had no prestige whatsoever; a force that was not able to provide any evidence of its devotion to our nation and its good faith toward our nation.

I: Perhaps this is because the Americans had no one who was a specialist in Vietnam. We had no one who had learned the Vietnamese language, no one who had studied Vietnamese culture. Vietnam was a tiny country, and a country that was very far away. We had many people who were French specialists, people who understood France, who paid attention to France, who were concerned about France and France's future, and they viewed Vietnam as only a little problem, something that could be resolved later, in the future. So in the interests of the big picture, we decided to help France regain its strength, so that it could become an ally of the U.S. And all those reasons resulted in a war...

VK: Yes, there were a number of things that are very regrettable. I know the good will, the good faith of Uncle Ho and of our side. If I am not mistaken, he expressed his attitude on this to an American writer in order to demonstrate his good faith in wanting to become an ally in the fight against Japan, in the fight against fascism, but this effort did succeed. The great intellect of Ho Chi Minh laid out what would have been a wonderful, a beautiful, path for us.



I: Uncle Ho lived for a while in the U.S., and he spoke English, right?

VK: Yes, Uncle Ho could speak many different languages – French, English, ...

I: What about you? Did you later continue to study English?

VK: Yes. I am able to read books in English so that I can study music, and I can handle ordinary, day-to-day situations in English. If I had a chance to review a little, I could speak enough English to get around. I really like to travel, to see sights as a tourist. I already can speak French and I can speak Russian. Now I would really like to visit the U.S. and see what it is like, but I haven't yet had the chance.

I: You haven't had a chance to visit the U.S.?

VK: No.

I: Have you been to France?

VK: Yes. I have been to France, and I have visited many other countries.

I: In Europe?

VK: Yes, in Europe.

I: And in Southeast Asia?

VK: In Southeast Asia I have been to China, and to Singapore. Singapore is an impressive country.

I: Singapore is a very developed country.

VK: I have been to Singapore and I have lived among them. However, they still have not yet resolved all of their problems. They still have some people who are extremely poor. They are not starving to death, but they are not well off. But naturally their society is very complicated, and they cannot solve all their problems all at once. But one must admit that Singapore is a cultured society. I like it very much. It is a beautiful place.

I: And they have been able to integrate a large number of different nationalities into one unified country, a country that is strong even though it is small.

VK: Very small, but also very beautiful and very organized. The people there understand the need to protect the environment and other things, and they treat each other well, in a very cultured manner.

I: Many of my friends say that Singapore is too organized. Americans like freedom more, and often freedom is a bit disorderly.

VK: When carried to excess. Naturally, there are two sides to every issue. When you get one thing, you lose something else. This is not a simple issue, and the situation is complex. But I think that the U.S. has a lot of good points – including music. I like American music very much. For instance, there have been a number of Russians who moved to the U.S. and became composers whom I greatly treasure and respect, people like Stravinsky and Dvorzhak. Those men were great talents, and the U.S. knows how to join hands with and respect and utilize these talents. And there are others in other types of music, like “rock” and “folk.” Vietnamese today like these kinds of music very much. So I very much regret that I have not yet had an opportunity to visit the U.S. and see what it is like.

I: Perhaps in the future you will have a chance.

VK: Perhaps I can go as a tourist. I want to see everything myself, with my own eyes. Just having people tell me about things is not enough. Like Singapore – I had to go there and see for myself. And I don’t like to just flit through quickly; I want to live with them, live in a home of one of their people in order to see what life is really like. And when I went to France it was the same. I liked to go out to visit friends in their homes to see how

they lived. I must admit that the world has many good things – many things on which they are ahead of Vietnam. But Vietnam is now trying to catch up, and there have recently been a number of indications that make me very happy. Cooperation between businessmen, and between the Vietnamese and American governments – these are indications that we should celebrate and applaud. I am a musician, so I show my celebration, my joy, via musical compositions. If you are on the internet, you can type in “Vietnam Net,” and that website has a section on Musicians [Nhạc Sĩ]. Click on the letter “V”, for Van Ky, and you will find my songs there. Among them is a new song I have written, which is titled, “*Bay Lên, Việt Nam*” [Fly High, Vietnam].

I: “*Bay Lên, Việt Nam*”?

VK: Yes, because the word “*bay*” [fly] is an image I had dating back to the time when I wrote the song “*Hy Vọng*” [Hope]. If you know that song, you would know the line, “*Về tương lai, đàn chim ơi cùng ta cất cánh*” [In the future, we will take off and fly with the birds.” This means that I wanted to take off and fly as far back as the year 1958 [sic], when the fighting was at its fiercest. I saw the future of this country, and we were flying into the future.

I: And now it is starting...

VK: Yes, now it is starting to fly.

I: It is flying low now...

VK: Yes, and it will climb higher. It will soar high. And I hope that this makes the relationships between our nations deeper and more sincere. And that sincerity will have great persuasive power. As for all the little games and tricks, no one is any better than anyone else on those things. But sincerity, honesty, will bring with it something beautiful

– the dreams of hope and of the future. I like to praise and to celebrate this. I like to delve into those types of subjects. So my song “*Hy Vọng*” [Hope] spoke to that point, now, most recently, so does my song, “*Bay Lên, Việt Nam*” [Fly High, Vietnam]. [VK recites several verses of the song].

I: When I get back to the U.S. I will go onto Vietnam Net...

VK: Yes, type on Vietnam Net, and there will be an icon to click on to hear “*Bay Lên, Việt Nam*” [Soar High, Vietnam]. If you want to learn more about my songs, on Vietnam Net I have a section that contains a dozen or more of my songs, and you can listen to them there. And my song, “*Bay Lên, Việt Nam*” has virtually become the theme song of Vietnam Net, because when you read the news reports on the website, you hear my song playing in the background. The song plays continuously, without stopping. You can say it is my concept, that it represents my thoughts about Vietnam today. Vietnam today is still pure, virtuous, and filled with love. It has not changed. And we have put the past aside and are looking toward the future. That is the most correct path, and I feel that the leaders of our country today and the leaders of the United States now have points of agreement and mutual understanding – at least the initial stage of understanding and agreement.

I: At a certain level.

VK: They understand each other, at least up to a certain level. I think that is very good and that they will do wonderful things. But we must truly understand each other, because all Vietnam needs is freedom – freedom, independence, and happiness. Nothing is more important. Uncle Ho told us that nothing is as precious as independence and freedom. That will always be true. But there is one point: we are still communists. I am a

communist. But we must understand – Marx said something that I paid close attention to  
... [videotape ends]